



2020-0010856MDPO

**Michelle Donelan MP**  
Minister of State for Universities

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Ruth Levin

Email: [R.Levin@unison.co.uk](mailto:R.Levin@unison.co.uk)

Dear Ms Levin,

Thank you for your email of 20 March, and the accompanying letter from UNISON, setting out some urgent covid-19 workforce concerns in higher education (HE).

Universities are at the front line in the immediate challenge of COVID-19, and our entire HE sector has a key role to play during these unprecedented times.

I have written to HE providers and students, setting out the action we are taking to mitigate the worst effects of the virus. I am now writing to you as staff, working in HE, to express my gratitude and address issues of concern that have been raised with me by trade unions and representative bodies.

I am immensely grateful to those of you undertaking the huge amount of work being done to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on our students, universities and wider communities. I know you are all working creatively and tirelessly to support your institutions and students under difficult and uncertain circumstances.

While HE providers and students' unions are independent and responsible for their own decisions on employment issues, it is important that they take appropriate measures to protect the health, safety and welfare of all staff, including student staff, at all times. This includes providing support for those who are now adapting to new working or teaching practices and delivering essential services from home. The Prime Minister announced that people should stay at home until further notice, except for very limited purposes. The latest guidance is available on GOV.UK at: [tinyurl.com/TYDCRQZ](https://tinyurl.com/TYDCRQZ).

The government's advice is that students remaining at university in England should now stay where they are and not attempt to travel. If they are living in student halls, or private rented accommodation, they should remain there and stay indoors while current restrictions are in force. I recognise that this inevitably places pressure on student accommodation and support services and I am grateful to those of you who are continuing to provide support to these students.

The wellbeing and safety of staff, as well as students, is of concern to us all. We have asked providers to identify essential staff required to deliver core campus services and support for students. I expect them to keep to a minimum the number of staff who are required to travel in the current circumstances. I also expect all providers to ensure and support staff to follow the guidance on social distancing, as well as ensuring the use of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) where necessary.

I understand that financial security is a pressing concern for many staff at the moment. When considering their response to COVID-19, it is important that employers pay attention to the impact of their decisions on all staff, including those staff who are on short-term, casual or hourly paid contracts, as well as those employed by outsourced services.

I expect that in most circumstances employers will be able to continue paying staff as usual. Where this is not the case, the new Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme put forward as part of the HMT package of support will be set up to help pay staff wages and keep people in employment. HMRC are working urgently to get the scheme up and running and we expect the first grants to be paid within weeks. The government is aiming to get it done before the end of April. Full guidance on the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) is available at: [tinyurl.com/TSQCPOE](https://tinyurl.com/TSQCPOE).

On 26 March, the Chancellor announced a new Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS) to support self-employed individuals affected by the coronavirus outbreak. The SEISS will provide grants to those who are self-employed, or members of partnerships, worth 80% of their trading profits/partnership trading profits, up to a maximum of £2,500 per month. The value of the grant is based on a 3-year average of trading/partnership trading profits, from the tax years 2016-17 to 2018-19.

SEISS is available to those who generate more than half of their total income from self-employment and who have trading profits of less than £50k. More information is available on GOV.UK at: [tinyurl.com/WMDR3Q3](https://tinyurl.com/WMDR3Q3).

I am aware that many staff will be concerned about meeting visa requirements. I can confirm that on Tuesday 24 March, the Home Office updated their visa guidance to provide greater certainty for international HE students and staff in the UK currently unable to return home due to COVID-19.

No individual who is in the UK legally, but whose visa is due to expire (or has already – see below), and who cannot leave because of travel restrictions related to COVID-19, will be regarded as an overstayer, or suffer any detriment in the future. Anyone whose leave expired after the 24 January and who cannot leave the country because of travel restrictions or self-isolation will have their visas extended to 31 May 2020. Individuals must contact the Coronavirus Immigration Team, details for which are provided below.

Individuals (students or staff) who cannot leave the UK due to travel restrictions or self-isolation and wish to stay in the UK in the long-term would ordinarily need to apply for a visa from their home country. Where individuals would normally be required to return to their country of residence to apply for a visa in a different category, they will now be able to apply from the UK to switch. More information is available on GOV.UK at: [tinyurl.com/WV6PVU3](https://www.gov.uk/tinyurl.com/WV6PVU3).

The Home Office's Coronavirus Immigration Helpline remains open: 0800 678 1767 (open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm – calls are free of charge if made from within the UK). The Home Office asks that customers check GOV.UK first as that is the central source of information, but if individuals remain concerned about their immigration status they can contact: [CIH@homeoffice.gov.uk](mailto:CIH@homeoffice.gov.uk).

I would like to acknowledge again and thank you for the formidable work that you are all doing at this challenging time.

I would be grateful if unions can please ensure that this letter is shared with all staff through your branch and staff networks.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Michelle Donelan'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

**Michelle Donelan MP**  
**Minister of State for Universities**